



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

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## CANADA PERIODICAL FUND

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, December 10, 2013

## THE SENATE

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[Translation]

### CANADA PERIODICAL FUND

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Chaput, calling the attention of the Senate to the Conservative government's unilateral decision not to review the standards and criteria of the Canada Periodical Fund and the disastrous consequences of this failure to act for francophone minority newspapers, such as *La Liberté*, Manitoba's only French-language weekly.

**Hon. Claudette Tardif:** Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to an issue that unfortunately has not yet been resolved and that concerns the unknown criteria for the funding formula of the Canada Periodical Fund.

First of all, allow me to thank our colleague, the Honourable Maria Chaput, for initiating this inquiry on the Canada Periodical Fund, a crucial program that has a direct impact on the survival of our French-language newspapers in official language minority communities. Senator Chaput is calling the attention of the Senate, and I quote:

...to the Conservative government's unilateral decision not to review the standards and criteria of the Canada Periodical Fund and the disastrous consequences of this failure to act for francophone minority newspapers.

On November 29, Senator Chaput gave a compelling presentation on the situation affecting the French-language weekly *La Liberté*, which celebrated its 100th anniversary last June.

It is unthinkable that, without immediate action by the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Manitobans could lose their only French-language weekly.

Furthermore, other French-language newspapers in Nova Scotia, Alberta and Ontario are in serious trouble.

Dear colleagues, for several years now, these community newspapers have been feeling the effects of the Department of Canadian Heritage's delay in changing the way this program works to better reflect the specific needs of certain French-language newspapers in minority communities, namely those that cover a broad area and have no choice but to depend on Canada Post for their weekly delivery.

Senator Chaput and I have asked the government many times to review the funding formula and to make the special eligibility criteria public. Today, the delay in changing the formula has become unacceptable.

Funding is insufficient and arbitrary and is forcing French-language newspapers to operate with less and less revenue.

I have spoken in this chamber several times to make my colleagues aware of this serious problem. In November 2009, the Association de la presse francophone informed me of a potential delay in the introduction of the Canada Periodical Fund. It was already concerned about a change in this program's formula.

It is important to point out that, for several years, these French-language weekly newspapers have also been gradually losing a significant amount of revenue from other sources. For example, the federal government has made considerable cuts to its newspaper advertising. What is more, many organizations and associations that are experiencing budget cuts are reserving less and less advertising space in these newspapers.

Speaking of federal government advertising, allow me to draw your attention, dear colleagues, to a very worrisome situation for official language newspapers. Over the past week, Canada Post, a Crown corporation subject to the Official Languages Act, ran an ad nationwide. Newspapers such as Nova Scotia's *Chronicle Herald*, Manitoba's *Winnipeg Free Press* and Alberta's *Calgary Herald* and *Edmonton Journal* all ran big ads in English. Under the Official Languages Act, Canada Post should have also run an ad in the provinces' official language newspapers to inform francophones, as it did anglophones, of the services it is offering during the holiday season. However, in the media plan submitted by Toronto's Zenith Optimedia, official language newspapers were intentionally overlooked.

In addition, Canada Post agreed to that media plan without making the changes that were necessary under the act. Efforts from these newspapers to contact the agency and a follow-up from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to inform the agency that it had to comply with the act were not successful. Zenith Optimedia refused to reverse its position on this issue. In my view, this situation is very worrying. Complaints submitted to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages will confirm that Canada Post did not meet its obligations under the Official Languages Act, but for the French-language minority newspapers, the damage will have already been done: they will not have received this ad. The biggest losers will therefore be the readers of these newspapers, since they will not have access to the same information that anglophone readers do.

Speaking of Canada Post, a steady increase in rates, including one scheduled for January, is driving up costs. It is difficult for a provincial newspaper like *Le Franco* to consider another mode of distribution, since subscribers are scattered throughout the province, from Saint-Isidore in the northwest to Lethbridge in the southeast — two communities that are a 10-hour drive apart.

Over the past three years, the funding for French-language weeklies has declined as a result of the new program. The newspapers' managers still do not know the exact formula, which is apparently based on the number of paying subscribers. Beyond the criteria used to determine who is eligible and who is not, recipients still do not know what criteria are being used to arrive at a specific amount. Newspapers are granted a given sum without clear justification.

The third and final year of the program is set to expire on March 31, 2014. Yesterday, December 9, 2013, marked the deadline for newspapers to submit their applications for the 2014-15 fiscal year. That means those applications were prepared before newspapers had the opportunity to review the fund's evaluation for the first three years or the adjustments that will be made to ensure fair and equitable funding.

Honourable senators, let me tell you about the situation of the *Le Franco* newspaper in Alberta.

*Le Franco* was established in Edmonton 85 years ago and has 4,200 subscribers. This newspaper is an integral part of our community. Over a three-year period, *Le Franco* has seen a general decline in revenue because of a new funding formula for the Canada Periodical Fund. This formula does not take into account the real constraints on *Le Franco* and a number of other French-language newspapers in minority settings, as I have said before.

*Le Franco's* administrators have had to come up with creative ways to find sources of revenue to make up for the losses. The Association canadienne française de l'Alberta has rethought its membership scheme to help financially. *L'annuaire des services en français*, a directory of French-language services in Alberta that is published annually, is another source of income, as is a monthly French-language publication created in September 2012 for the Calgary area and the southern part of the province., but these are far from sufficient.

*Le Franco* has a team of just three employees. The amply justified activities and operations of this newspaper deserve funding. With the increased number of subscriptions have come a larger print run and higher mailing costs. The postal rates are going up by 10 per cent in January 2014. The postal service is essential for distributing the newspaper throughout the province. *Le Franco* continues to print paper copies mainly because its readers are spread throughout Alberta, where access to broadband Internet is often limited.

French-language newspapers are tools of communication and information that are essential to the vitality of francophone minority communities. For francophone and francophile Albertans, whose communities are spread out throughout the province, *Le Franco* enjoys an excellent reputation thanks to the hard work of its team of collaborators and the initiatives taken with its partners.

The number of subscriptions to the newspaper is rising. Our weekly Albertan newspaper opened an office on December 2 because of its popularity and the growing francophone population in Calgary. Nonetheless, budgets are tight so this office is occupied by only one journalist who works in Edmonton as a correspondent. Events in Edmonton are covered by the paper's management, one full-time journalist and freelancers.

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It is difficult to imagine the hoops this newspaper has to jump through to produce and offer francophones a high-quality newspaper in their language. Meeting that challenge requires a great deal of courage and motivation from everyone involved.

*Le Franco*, the only weekly French-language paper for the Franco-Albertan community, is a key part of community development. It is the platform for many associations and organizations that count on the newspaper to spread information about community issues.

Honourable senators, French-language print media in minority communities is invaluable to our country. We need to do everything we can to protect it and help it prosper. It must not disappear. French-language newspapers deserve special treatment, and it is imperative that the government take measures to ensure a transparent funding formula as well as stable and predictable funding.

The Minister of Canadian Heritage must intervene in accordance with Part VII of the Official Languages Act. The government must take positive action right now to get minority French-language newspapers out of this difficult dilemma. There is a pressing need for the government to carefully consider the reality and the needs of minority French-language newspapers by adapting the Canada Periodical Fund funding formula.

**Hon. Ghislain Maltais:** Would Senator Tardif allow a brief question?

**Senator Tardif:** Of course.

**Senator Maltais:** As you know, I am from a French-speaking province and, in the regions that are far from large centres, we also have an issue with regional weeklies that receive no funding. I would like to know if francophone business people are involved, if they are contributing in some way. Is it a set amount or is it tied to sales? Are members of the francophone business community in these regions contributing to the weeklies?

**Senator Tardif:** Yes, the business community contributes, in the sense that businesses purchase ads in the weekly newspaper. Furthermore, every year, *Le Franco* publishes a little directory of all the associations and businesses that operate in French in the province.